

“The Rapture of the Saints.”

“Then, we that are alive, that are left; shall together with them (the dead in Christ) be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, &c.”—I. THESS. IV., 17.

This is the statement which the Apostle Paul makes to the Christians of Thessalonica (A.D. 52) respecting what would happen to them and him at the coming of the Lord. It is clear from this and other passages in the Epistles of St. Paul, that the coming of the Lord was regarded by him, and by the Christian Church everywhere, as an event close at hand, which they might all expect to witness. It was the hope of the church, the constant teaching of the apostles, and the express declaration of Christ Himself. Our Lord had assured His disciples that the generation then living would not pass away before His return or Parousia.

The order of events, when that consummation should arrive, is stated with great precision by St. Paul in this passage.

First.—The Lord Himself would descend from heaven with a shout, &c.

Secondly.—The Christian dead would be raised up.

Thirdly.—The living Christians who survived till that period would be caught up in the clouds, together with the resuscitated dead.

Fourthly.—They would together meet the Lord in the air, and so continue to be with Him for ever.

This is no doubt an extraordinary statement, and it is not strange that it has been received with not a little doubt and incredulity even by professed believers in revelation and inspiration. Many attempts have been made to explain it away, and probably few can be found who are prepared to accept it as a fact which has actually taken place. Nevertheless, there the statement is, and the credit of the apostle as a teacher of truth, as an accredited messenger of Christ, and as an inspired organ of divine revelation, is staked on its accuracy. Astounding as it may seem, there can be no mistaking the meaning of the language, which is as plain and as simple as words can make it, and capable of only one interpretation. It distinctly affirms that at the coming of the Lord—the living saints, along with the Christian dead, would all together be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and that this coming of the Lord was just then at hand, that is, within less than thirty years.

We must bear in mind also, that these extraordinary events do not

rest on the unsupported testimony of the Apostle Paul (though that ought to be sufficient). They are vouched for by the word of the Lord Himself. He clearly alludes to this "rapture," in his prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives (Matt. xxiv., 31) when He says: "He shall send forth His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from the one end of heaven to the other." This gathering together was evidently in the mind of Paul when he beseeches the Thessalonians "by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and their gathering together unto Him" (II. Thess. ii., 1), as well as in the classical passage at the head of this paper. Nothing can be more certain than that our Lord is committed to this statement concerning the rapture of the saints, and the period of its occurrence, which is expressly affirmed to lie within the life time of the apostles, and before the current generation had passed away.

Here we are met by the obvious objection that it is inconceivable that such an event as the "rapture of the saints" could have taken place without leaving an indelible mark in history, without being embalmed in tradition, without such testimony, that its memory could never have been lost. And, at first sight, this conclusion seems so reasonable and so probable, that it appears all but incontrovertible.

Before, however, we impute error to the express affirmation of the apostle, it may be well to examine the foundations on which this adverse conclusion rests. We are to consider the peculiar circumstances of the time, of the country, and of the people as they then existed. We are apt to measure things by the standard of our own time, and of our own experience, and to suppose that the same rule will apply to all times and circumstances. We naturally enough say, "were such an event as the sudden and simultaneous disappearance of a number of prominent persons from our town, or village, or neighbourhood, to take place, what a sensation it would cause, what alarm and consternation. It would be reported all over the land, it would be the topic of conversation in every company." Very true; but suppose all this occurred when the country was in the occupation of a foreign army, when the invaders were marching through the land, leaving devastation and ruin everywhere in their track. Suppose the metropolis in a state of siege, captured, burnt to the ground; fire, famine and slaughter raging in every quarter; all social order convulsed amid the agonies of an expiring nation. What sensation would the disappearance of some of the members of a despised sect excite in such circumstances? Would they be missed? Or if missed, would it be thought unaccountable? Amidst the fearful signs and portents of that tremendous crisis the disappearance of the Christians might easily pass without notice.

Then, let it be considered, how little we know of the manner of this "rapture of the saints." Are we to suppose that they went up in material flesh-and-blood bodies into the region of the air, or that crowds of spectators witnessed the scene? Was it visible to the human eye, and was it such as to attract observation? On all these points we are in absolute ignorance, except that we know that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God"; and that we have reason to believe that the whole transaction was of a sudden and instantaneous character, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." (I. Cor. xv., 50-52.)

Further, we may have very exaggerated ideas as to the numbers caught up at the coming of the Lord. The Scriptures lead us to con-

clude that "in the last days" a wide-spread defection from the faith greatly thinned the ranks of professing Christians. This is plainly predicted by our Lord and His apostles. "Because iniquity shall abound, the love of *the many* (*i.e.*, the majority) shall wax cold." Equally dark is the picture drawn by St. Paul in his Second Epistle to Timothy. The proportion of those who were morally prepared to enter into the kingdom at the coming of Christ would not seem to exceed one-half of the nominal disciples. Of the ten virgins, five were excluded from the marriage feast. Of the two women who were grinding at the mill, one was taken and the other left. Of the two men in the field, one was taken and the other left. Of the two men in one bed, one was taken and the other left. These representations are full of suggestiveness, and their repeated allusion to the proportion *one-half* seems to have a marked significance. It does not necessarily imply that the excluded were finally cast away, but that they forfeited the privilege of entering the kingdom without passing through the ordeal of death.

Moreover, consider how much of the history of the past has never been written; how much has perished; how much lies buried. But prophecy is inverted history, and we read the fulfilment in the prediction. We have a conspicuous example of this in the 24th and 25th chapters of St. Matthew. Yet how few writers have left a record of that tragic catastrophe which probably has no parallel in the blood-stained annals of the human race. We have to lament that the history of the siege of Jerusalem, as recorded by Tacitus, is irrecoverably lost, and but for the happy accident, shall we say, or rather the singular providence that a Jewish historian, a contemporary of the apostles, and an eye-witness of the death throes of Jerusalem, has left a full detail of that unparalleled event, how scanty and fragmentary would our knowledge be. It may be said "why have we no supplementary chapter in the Acts of the Apostles, carrying down the history of Christianity to the destruction of Jerusalem?" For a very sufficient reason, that none of the apostles remained on earth to transmit to future ages the fulfilment of our Lord's prediction. Had even one been left it would be inconceivable that he could have omitted to place on record the most awful event in the history of his nation, and of the world. Of all the fallacies which tradition has palmed on human credulity the most incredible is the fiction that St. John survived for many years the destruction of Jerusalem! What? Was John the man to be found unwatchful and asleep at his Lord's appearing? Was John shut out with the foolish virgins when the wise and wakeful entered in? Impossible! His Lord's coming was the predicted boundary of his earthly career—till that came to pass he was to tarry. How he longed for the accomplishment of that event we learn from the closing words of the Apocalypse, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" Who can doubt that he was among the first to "go forth and meet the Bridegroom." Yet almost the whole Christian church has been "rankly abused" with the fabulous legend of St. John's survival. That he has left no record of the destruction of Jerusalem is in itself a sufficient proof that he did not survive that event, though we have in addition the Lord's implied promise that he should live up to that period. In a word, we are placed in this dilemma: either the expectations cherished by the early Christians, the teaching of St. Paul and the rest of the apostles, and the express and reiterated predictions of the Lord Jesus Christ must be set aside as erroneous and mistaken, or else He did return as He promised, before the efflux of that generation. He did gather together His elect

from the one end of heaven to the other. He did execute His threatened doom upon His enemies. He did raise the Christian dead. He did summon the living saints to meet Him in the air, and they did enter into the joy of their Lord, and into the Kingdom of Heaven, according to His faithful and infallible word.

P O S T - S C R I P T U M .

There is no warning more needful to the student of the "Christian Origins" than to beware of Tradition. It is notoriously a false witness, and should always be regarded with suspicion. Never has its influence been more baleful than on Christianity; and nothing would clear the atmosphere so much as its exclusion from court altogether. Of the death of the apostles authentic history knows absolutely nothing, and very little of their life, but Tradition knows everything. It knows how, when, and where St Paul and St. Peter perished; how the twelve parcelled out the globe as their dioceses; how and where most of them suffered martyrdom. It is specially precise in its accounts concerning the Apostle John and the Virgin Mary, the assumption of the latter and the extreme old age of the former, who survived his bath of boiling oil, and heaved the ground above him when laid in his grave!

One is sometimes tempted to think that theologians and Biblical critics pay more regard to the weakest, most inane and childish babble of Tradition than to the express and authentic testimony of divine revelation.

